



# Body confidence campaign

Progress report 2015



Government  
Equalities Office

## Contents

|                                                    |    |
|----------------------------------------------------|----|
| Foreword                                           | 3  |
| Introduction                                       | 4  |
| What is body image?                                | 4  |
| Poor body image causes real harm                   | 5  |
| Body image is an equalities issue                  | 7  |
| What about men and boys? Aren't they affected too? | 8  |
| Body image across the life course                  | 9  |
| Body image is a public health issue                | 10 |
| Actions 2013-15                                    | 12 |
| Raising awareness and understanding...             | 12 |
| Working with industry...                           | 14 |
| Empowering individuals...                          | 16 |
| Further information on body image:                 | 17 |
| Government Equalities Office                       | 17 |
| Be Real                                            | 17 |
| Endangered Bodies                                  | 17 |
| Body Gossip                                        | 17 |
| Beat                                               | 17 |
| Credits                                            | 18 |
| Thanks                                             | 18 |
| Expert Advisory Group:                             | 19 |
| BIG group:                                         | 19 |

## Foreword



It has been my great pleasure and privilege to lead the government's work on body image over the last two and a half years. During that time we have seen a steady increase in public awareness and understanding of this vital issue. 2014 was in many ways a watershed year in which body image truly entered the zeitgeist. *Be Real*, the national campaign on body image, was launched in October 2014 with a wide range of supporting partners. GirlGuiding UK ran its own campaign urging girls to #BeBodyConfident, and published a landmark 6th Girls' Attitudes survey. 2014 also saw the reinstatement of the Body Confidence Awards, and an explosion of body image activism on social media.

With so much already happening in this area, we need to be clear about the government's role: why we are involved, and where we add value. The 'why' is the easy part: the growing weight of evidence pointing to how gender equality is undermined by social expectations of people's appearance, and how appearance is represented and dissected in public spaces. Add to that, the part played by poor body image in our physiological and psychological wellbeing, on our confidence and aspirations, and the importance of this particular issue becomes evident.

The causes of body image are complex and multi-factorial; there is no simple answer, no quick cure. But government can play its part by adding its voice to the public debate, by bringing to the table a range of interested parties, by identifying the cross-cutting policy issues and by supporting those who work directly with those most affected. This report provides a summary of how we have fulfilled that role, and I would like to thank all those who played their part in it, most particularly our thoughtful and committed Expert Advisory Group.

**Jo Swinson MP**

**Minister for Women and Equalities, March 2015**

## Introduction

The government's body confidence campaign was established in November 2010 to:

- Respond to public concerns and raise public debate to promote cultural change
- Support efforts to promote media literacy and resilience, particularly among young people
- Develop constructive relationships with industry and other stakeholders to encourage positive action and good practice

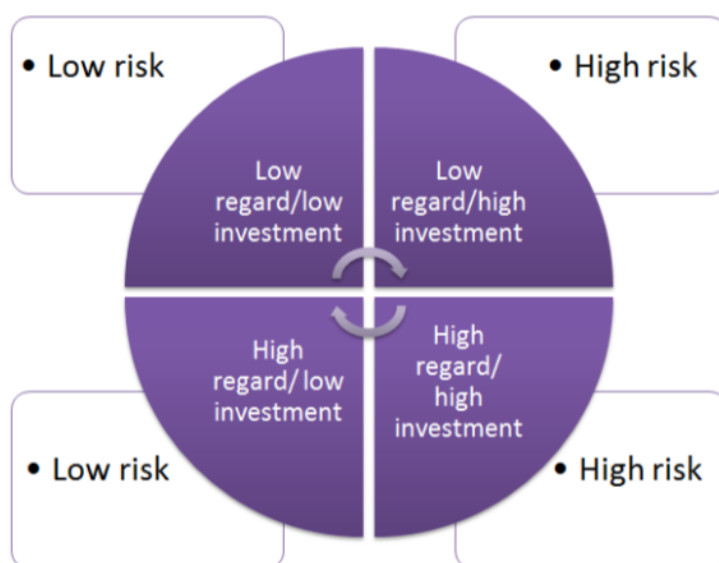
A first progress report was published in mid 2013; this report brings progress up to date to the end of December 2014.

## What is body image?

Body image relates to how people experience their body in the world, encompassing:

- Body confidence – how satisfied they are with their appearance; and
- Self-objectification – how much they see themselves through others' eyes, investing their self-worth in how their appearance is judged by others.

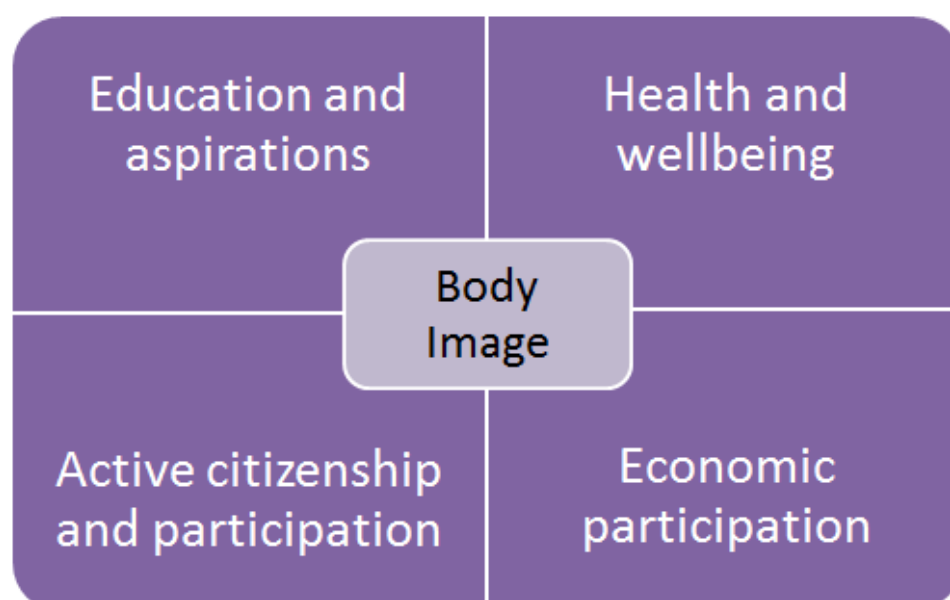
Not considering yourself attractive isn't necessarily problematic – all societies have ideals of beauty which most people can't live up to. But when this gets out of proportion – when societies see beauty as the most important female quality, or when individuals feel worthless or ashamed – the damage to personal and public health grows. So having good body image does not mean thinking that you are beautiful (though you are welcome to!); it means appreciating your body for what it is and does, in healthy balance with all the other attributes and actions that combine to create self-worth.



## Poor body image causes real harm

Body image is an issue of enormous public concern, especially to parents and young people. It is a contributory factor in poor mental wellbeing, eating disorders, obesity, low aspirations and a range of risky behaviours including drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, and unsafe sex, especially among women and girls<sup>1</sup>.

We pay a particularly high opportunity cost for the impact of low body confidence on women's educational and workplace aspirations, active citizenship, and participation in public life. The cultural and societal pressures for bodily perfection focus our young women on an unrelenting regime of 'self-improvement', and generate a conviction that they have to look perfect before they are entitled to expect equality, respect and appreciation. This is an enormous waste of women's time, talent and emotional wellbeing.



One in five primary school age girls say they have been on a diet, while 87% of girls aged 11-21 think that women are judged more on their appearance than on their ability<sup>2</sup>.

23% of girls aged 7-21 report not participating in exercise because they are unhappy with their body image<sup>3</sup>. 48% of girls think getting sweaty from taking part in sports is unfeminine, and nearly one third of boys think that girls who are sporty are not very feminine<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Littleton, H., Radecki Breitkopf, C. and Berenson, A. (2005). Body Image and Risky Sexual Behaviours: An Investigation in a Tri-Ethnic Sample. *Body Image*. 2(2):193-198

<sup>2</sup> GirlGuiding UK. (2013). Attitudes Survey

Around four and a half thousand teenage girls develop an eating disorder in the UK every year



## The consequences of low Body Image



1 in 6 GCSE age students has avoided going to school because they felt bad about their appearance



### Health problems Such as:

- Eating disorders
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Reduced physical activity
- Weight gain

The number of cosmetic procedures performed in the UK has quadrupled over the last decade



### Engaging in risky behaviour such as:

- Unsafe sex
- Self-harm
- Substance abuse
- Steroid use
- Cosmetic surgery

### Impact on aspirations

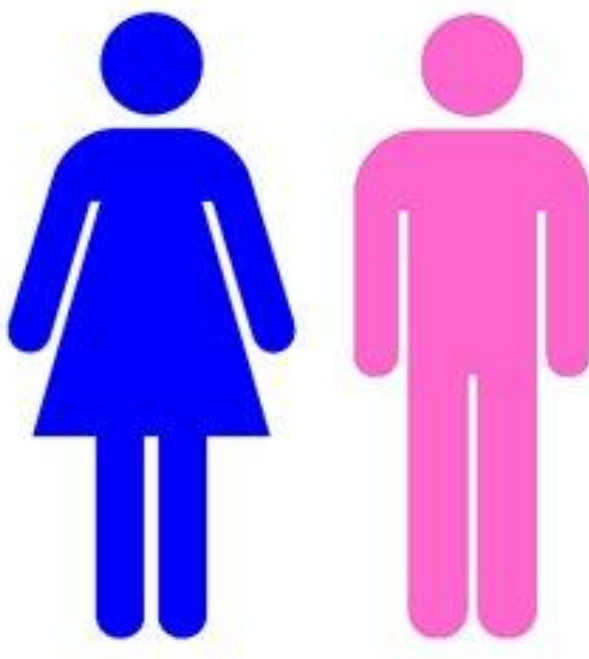
- Reduced social participation
- Decreased academic performance
- Reduced participation at school

Continued:

<sup>3</sup> GirlGuiding UK. (2012). Attitudes Survey

<sup>4</sup> Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation. (2012). Changing the Game for Girls.

## Body image is an equalities issue



Poor body image is not just a problem for individuals. It is an equalities issue, limiting the opportunities and rewards on offer to some sections of society, and punishing people unfairly if they step outside of proscribed roles. It:

- **disproportionately affects women.** Men and boys are affected, but not in the same ways or to the same extent as women. While men may also view their appearance negatively, they are less objectified and less self-objectifying. They also have a wider range of social roles that do not demand unrealistic standards of physical appearance<sup>5</sup>.
- **reduces women's economic, political and social power.** Poor body image is associated with lower confidence, lower aspirations and lower social participation. If you aim for less, less is generally what you get<sup>5 6 7 8 9</sup>.
- **reinforces the sexual objectification of women.** Poor body image both fuels and is fuelled by the sexual objectification of women, the belittling of women's achievements, and women's voice and visibility in public spaces.

---

<sup>5</sup> Calogero, R. (2013). Objects Don't Object: Evidence that Self-Objectification Disrupts Women's Social Activism. *Psychological Science*. 24(3): 312-318.

<sup>6</sup> Quinn, D., Kallen, R., Twenge, J. and Fredrickson, B. (2006). The Disruptive Effect of Self-Objectification on Performance. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 30: 59-64.

<sup>7</sup> Saguy, T., Quinn, D., Dovidio, J. and Pratto, F. (2010). Interacting Like a Body: Objectification can Lead Women to Narrow Their Presence in Social Interactions. *Psychological Science*. 21: 178-182.

<sup>8</sup> Gervais, S. J., Vescio, T. K. and Allen, J. (2011). When What you See is What you Get: The Consequences of the Objectifying Gaze for Women and Men. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 35:5.

<sup>9</sup> Women's Business Council Report. (2013). Maximising Women's Contribution to Future Economic Growth.

- **has particular implications for black and minority ethnic women, women with disabilities, and older women.** The social value given to a narrow ideal of feminine beauty is excluding and punitive to women who are not seen to fit within this mould. They are invisible and unheard (like older women on TV, or BME women in media), or criticised and demeaned if they do have a public presence. Sometimes, if they are close to the ideal, they are ‘celebrated’ (black women who are light-skinned with ‘good’ hair, or older women who look much younger). Sometimes their difference is eroticised, but only rarely is it considered irrelevant<sup>10</sup>.

These issues were explored in our academic seminar [‘The Watched Body: gender roles, body image and public intrusions’](http://www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence) (www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence). Participants discussed how the continued location of feminine identity within physical appearance, and the overwhelming scrutiny and policing of that in society and the media, are prevailing barriers that result in poor body image, violence against women and girls, homophobic bullying and women in the workplace.

## What about men and boys? Aren’t they affected too?

Yes, they are. Less so than women, but still at a significant level. Research shows that while men are undoubtedly affected by our society’s intense focus on physical appearance, and both men and women experience low body satisfaction<sup>11</sup>, body image generally affects women and girls more acutely<sup>12</sup>. However, this doesn’t make it less important for us to understand how men are affected: not only because this will help us better understand how body image is gendered, but also because we cannot neglect the needs of men and boys with low body image, or assume that their needs are identical to those of women and girls.

We need to know more about whether the focus on girls and women has obscured our understanding of men’s needs, whether men’s wider diversity of role models may partially account for their generally higher body confidence, whether rates of poor body image may ‘catch up’ with men and boys to the same prevalence as for women and girls, whether media representations of gender and bodies influence body confidence in the same way for men as they do for women, and whether the gendered nature of the ‘perfect body’ (powerful and muscular for men, thin and hairless for women) makes a difference to how men and women experience body image and its impact on their confidence and aspirations.

---

<sup>10</sup> For example: Barry, B. (2013). Current State of Research on Body Image: Evidence, Understanding and Policy. A Perspective from Business and Economics. *Presentation to Academic Seminar on Body Image*.

<sup>11</sup> Barlett, C.P., Vowels, C.L. and Saucier, D.A. (2008). Meta-Analyses of the Effects of Media Images on Men’s Body-Image Concerns. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. 27(3): 279-310.

<sup>12</sup> Algars, M., Santtila, P., Varjonen, M., Witting, K., Johansson, A., Jern, P. and Sandnabba, N. (2009). The Adult Body: How Age, Gender, and Body Mass Index are Related to Body Image. *Journal of Aging and Health*. 21(8): 1112-1132.

## Body image across the life course

Our British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) findings show that women's body satisfaction does not improve as they move toward and into midlife; indeed, a 45 year old woman is as likely to be dissatisfied with her appearance as her 19 year old daughter.<sup>13</sup>

The BSAS elicited information on appearance satisfaction but not on levels of self-objectification. It may be that although midlife women report body satisfaction no higher than that of younger women, they have lower levels of self-objectification (and, indeed, lower levels of sexual objectification from others). In other words, they rate themselves lower, but they also prioritise this less.

It is possible, though, that midlife women do care, and that these low levels of body satisfaction reveal the impact of living in a society where women are told they are primarily valued for their youthful beauty. The 'invisible at 40' phenomenon, allied to midlife women's generally lower mental wellbeing and lack of resources for self-care, may point to an important area for further investigation.

---

<sup>13</sup> Government Equalities Office. (2014). Body Confidence: Findings from the British Social Attitudes Survey. October 2014.

## Body image is a public health issue



Poor body image is a public health problem. In September 2013 we held an academic seminar on body image where experts discussed the current state of evidence on body image ([www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence](http://www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence)). Among the fascinating presentations was evidence that people with poor body image are more likely to lack self-esteem, making them vulnerable to peer and partner pressure. They are also more likely to be depressed and may return to risky coping strategies and self-soothing behaviours. These can include not taking care of themselves during sex, vomiting or purging, alcohol and drug abuse, crash dieting, smoking to control appetite, and self harm.

Obesity is a significant problem in the UK. There is a strong relationship between poor body image, disordered eating and weight problems. People with low levels of body satisfaction are more likely to gain weight over time (regardless of starting BMI)<sup>14</sup>; whereas those who have higher levels of body satisfaction are less likely to put on weight. Public health campaigns that tackle obesity are most effective when they focus on health behaviour change rather than body size, like England's Change4Life campaign.

The causes of eating disorders are complex. Poor body image is often a factor, but it is not a prerequisite. But poor body image is strongly linked with depression, and society's idealisation of physical appearance is a significant pressure upon young people's mental wellbeing. Positive body image is likely to be a resilience factor.<sup>14 15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Neumark-Sztainer, D., Paxton, S.J., Hannah, P.J., Haines, J. and Story, M. (2006). Does Body Satisfaction Matter? Five-Year Longitudinal Associations Between Body Satisfaction and Health Behaviors in Adolescent Females and Males. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 39(2):244-251

<sup>15</sup> Leichty, J. (2010). Body Image Distortion and Three Types of Weight Loss Behaviors Among Nonoverweight Girls in the United States. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of The Society for Adolescent Medicine*. 47(2):176-182.

While the reasons for psychological distress are individual, their expression is culturally influenced.<sup>16 17</sup> The fact that so many people are expressing distress through their bodies is telling. We do not help young people to resist eating disorders if we idealise very thin bodies, stigmatise weight in moral terms, and measure people's worth by the size of their thighs.

---

<sup>16</sup> For example: Xie, B., Unger, J.B., Gallaher, P., Johnson, C.A., Wu, Q. and Chou, C. (2010). Overweight, Body Image, and Depression in Asian and Hispanic Adolescents. *American Journal of Health Behavior*. 34(4):476-488.

<sup>17</sup> For example: Nieri, T., Kulis, S., Keith, V.M. and Hurdle, D. (2005). Body Image, Acculturation, and Substance Abuse among Boys and Girls in the Southwest. *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*. 31(4):617-639.

## Actions 2013-15

### Raising awareness and understanding...

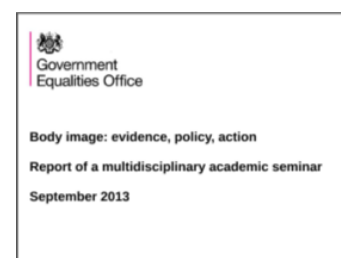
#### Be Real

Launched in October 2014, the Be Real campaign acts as a hub to link partners and the public on their activities on body image. The government supported the development of Be Real, and contributed funding to the new web portal ([www.berealcampaign.co.uk](http://www.berealcampaign.co.uk)).



#### Body Image: evidence, policy, action

In September 2013 we held a multidisciplinary seminar on body image, with a report published in December 2013.



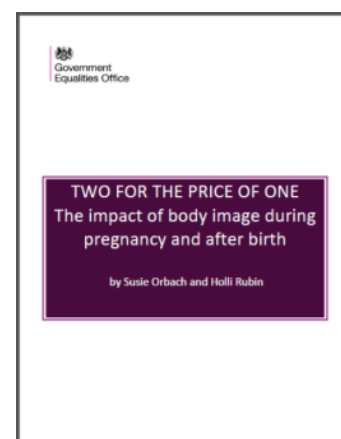
#### The Watched Body

In October 2014, we held an academic seminar on gender roles and assumptions, which discussed how gender underpins four areas of key policy concern: body image, violence against women and girls, homophobic bullying and women in the workplace. A report is forthcoming, March 2015.



#### Two For The Price Of One

Written by Susie Orbach and Holli Rubin, this report addressed the impact of body image during pregnancy and after birth, for both mother and child. It arose from the work of the BIG (Body Image Group) of midwives, health visitors and psychologists that was hosted by the Body Confidence Campaign.



## **Costing the Invisible: A review of the evidence examining the links between body image, aspirations, education, and workplace confidence**

This report was commissioned to explore whether and how the effects of body image on young girls and women may impact into later employment and skills. It was published by the Centre for Appearance Research.



## **British Social Attitudes Survey**

In October 2014 we published findings from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) that found a significant minority of the population is dissatisfied with their appearance, and that women have lower satisfaction rates than men.

Women's body satisfaction does not improve as they move toward and into midlife (63% of women aged 18-34 satisfied with their appearance, compared to 57% of women aged 35-49). Body satisfaction peaks in the years 50-64 (at 71%). In those aged over 65, 63% are satisfied with their appearance – almost the same as those aged 18-34.

Three-quarters (77%) of adults think that society puts too much pressure on females to have a sexualised appearance, half of all adults (47%) think that 'how you look affects what you can achieve in life', and one-third (32%) agree with the statement 'your value as a person depends on how you look'. Opinions did not vary significantly between men and women but were shown to be more of a concern amongst certain age groups.



## **Roundtables**

Jo Swinson held regular roundtables and special meetings on various aspects of body image, including the experiences of black and minority ethnic women, men and boys, media representation, social media, and gender roles and stereotypes.

You can view our publications at: [www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence](http://www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence)

## Working with industry...

### Working with retail



Many retailers are taking positive steps to support body image, and Jo Swinson met with high street retailers to discuss how we can share and spread good practice. We were pleased to welcome Louise McCabe from ASOS onto the Expert Advisory Group. The Minister also supported the launch of Debenhams' Size 16 mannequins, which allow a much wider range of customers to enjoy the full shopping experience.

### Working with advertising



The Advertising Association followed up its groundbreaking 'Pretty As A Picture' report with research to understand how advertisers can better reflect diversity in the UK, called The Whole Picture. Jo Swinson helped to launch the report at an event in November 2014. In February 2015 the Minister spoke at a special event organised by Women in Advertising and

Communication London (WACL), which debated the representations of gender in advertising. View the AA reports at: [www.adassoc.org.uk/publications](http://www.adassoc.org.uk/publications)

## **Working with sport and fitness**

We worked closely with the government's Women and Sports programme to explore the role of body image in women's motivation to participate in sport. This included a roundtable for women's magazine editors and a special event in Parliament, hosted by the Periodical Publications Association (PPA). We have recently worked with Women in Sport and the Youth Sport Trust on forthcoming qualitative research into girls' sports participation aged 7-8, to understand the gendered nature of play and physical activity at this age. A report is forthcoming March, 2015.

## **Working with media**

We held a number of meetings with the producers, consumers and critics of a range of media, including a special Expert Advisory Group meeting on body image and social media.

There is widespread public concern about the effects of the ways women are portrayed in the media – in particular, about the limited range of ways in which women are portrayed, about sexualisation, about the invisibility of women who are not young, white, heterosexual and conventionally beautiful. A newer concern is about how social media provides an easy place to transmit offensive or abusive content. Though it is also, of course, a place where people can reach out to each other, find others who are like-minded, and campaign for a better future.

9 out of 10 adults would like to see a broader range of body shapes shown in advertising and the media<sup>18</sup>. 9 out of 10 teenage girls think that statements about girls and women on TV and in magazines focus too much on what women look like, instead of what they achieve<sup>19</sup>.

The government's role is to ensure the regulatory and legislative framework is working well and is as widely accessible as possible, to support young people's resilience and media literacy, to work positively with industry, and to promote informed debate and an emerging social consensus. In 2015 it is undertaking a range of actions including the establishment of a revenge porn hotline, new support for schools and parents with online abuse, work with the media and advertising industries on how women are employed and represented, and resources to help women challenge offensive and illegal content effectively.

---

<sup>18</sup> Central YMCA. (2009). Healthy Body Poll.

<sup>19</sup> GirlGuiding UK. (2011). Attitudes Survey.

## Empowering individuals...

### **Taking Action on Body Image**

This toolkit was launched in October 2014, and was written by Dr. Helen Sharpe at the Institute of Psychiatry together with Beat, the eating disorders association. It is aimed at youth workers and leaders, and aims to help inspire and support young people to mount their own active citizenship projects on body image. The toolkit is being disseminated through the National Citizen Service.



### **Schools guidance on teaching body image in the classroom**

This guidance, developed by the PSHE Association, will raise standards in how teachers support learning on body image. It will offer an evidence-based assessment of the resources available, allowing teachers to choose quality assured, context-sensitive tools to address this topic. The guidance, Teacher Guidance: Key standards in teaching about body image, will be published in March 2015.

## **Further information on body image:**

### **Government Equalities Office**

[www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence](http://www.gov.uk/geo/body-confidence)

### **Be Real**

[www.berealcampaign.co.uk](http://www.berealcampaign.co.uk)

### **Endangered Bodies**

[www.endangeredbodies.org](http://www.endangeredbodies.org)

### **Body Gossip**

[www.bodygossip.org](http://www.bodygossip.org)

### **Beat**

[www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)

## Credits

### Thanks

- Be Real Campaign
- All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image
- Centre for Appearance Research
- National Citizen Service
- PSHE Association
- Women in Sport
- Youth Sport Trust
- GirlGuiding UK
- Prof Janet Treasure, Institute of Psychiatry
- Dr Helen Sharpe, UCL and Anna Freud Centre
- Karen Fraser, Credos
- Sue Eustace, Advertising Association
- Cilla Snowball, Advertising Association
- Wendy Hallett, Hallett Retail
- Dr Dianne Neumark-Sztainer
- Dr Rachel Calogero
- Prof Rosalind Gill
- Prof Becky Francis
- Prof Feona Attwood
- Prof Carolyn Jackson
- Dr Eleanor Formby
- Dr Emma Rich
- Dr Fiona Vera-Grey
- Prof Gabriele Griffin
- Dr Helen Malson
- Dr Maddy Coy
- Dr Meg Barker
- Prof Sharon Mavin
- Prof Tina Miller
- Dr Ben Barry
- Prof Helga Dittmar
- Dr Emma Halliwell
- Prof Susan Paxton
- Dr Sarah Riley
- Dr Ulrike Schmidt

- John Adams, Dadblog UK
- Matt Buttery
- Chris Muwanguzi
- Mai Buckley, Royal Free Hospital
- Eryca Freemantle

### **Expert Advisory Group:**

- Ruth Holdaway
- Amanda Duffy
- Holli Rubin
- Susie Orbach
- Susan Ringwood
- Caryn Franklin
- Debra Bourne
- Kathryn Jacob
- Sue Eustace
- Louise McCabe
- Elli Moody
- Deborah Potts
- Ed Watson
- Sue Tibballs
- Robert Baldry
- Phillippa Diedrichs
- Viv Groskop
- Leanne Thorndyke

### **BIG group:**

- Mary Stewart
- Obi Amadi
- Claire Barrow
- Alison Williams
- Paula Magee
- Orpha Edwards
- Holli Rubin
- Susie Orbach

© Crown copyright 2015

This publication (not including logos) is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

To view this licence:

visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3)

email [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

write to Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London, TW9 4DU

About this publication:

enquiries [womensengagement@geo.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:womensengagement@geo.gsi.gov.uk)

download <http://bit.ly/ZTftq8>

Follow us on Twitter:

[@Govt\\_Women](https://twitter.com/Govt_Women)

Like us on Facebook:

[facebook.com/GovernmentEqualitiesOffice](https://facebook.com/GovernmentEqualitiesOffice)